



Session:	2/65
Date:	26 April 2016
No:	12

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

TUESDAY, 26 APRIL 2016

Responses to Questions taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

HST and Ottawa letter

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Last week when we were discussing the government's decision to hike the HST the Premier said that the province had notified Ottawa at the end of March.

Question to the Premier: Will you table a copy of the letter sent by your government to Ottawa announcing your plan to raise the HST?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I'll go back and review that letter with staff, and if I'm able to provide that letter to the House I will.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Cabinet political staff and rural development budget

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

On Thursday we learned in the Budget Estimates that this government is paying its political staff out of funds from the rural development fund.

Question to the Premier: Why did you try and hide the salaries of your Cabinet political staff inside the budget of rural development?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, let me start my saying that when we came to office, or when I became Premier, there were 11 staff associated with Cabinet, a role that we now refer to as Cabinet liaison, and that that number was reduced to four.

Those people were paid in the 2015-2016 Budget in the normal process, and in the 2016-2017 Budget that money has been brought into the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries to go together with the work of the people who work in rural economic development to make for an enhanced effort. But there was no element whatsoever of taking funds from rural economic development. In fact, we're adding to and enhancing the effort to create greater synergy to achieve greater results in that area.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Premier, when they were in that other position they were transparent. Now it appears you've hid them through other different departments. Is that the case and why did you do it?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: If the hon. member is correct that we tried to hide it, he didn't take long to find it.

There was no attempt whatsoever. We brought forward a budget. We brought forward the estimates in support of that. We're on the floor, as the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries was last week. He took questions during the consideration of the estimates that came up again in Question Period. I don't know why in the world anyone'd be saying there's any issue of transparency here. This is really about synergy, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Mr. Speaker, I think it has everything to do with transparency and that's what we're not seeing, we're not seeing any transparency by this government.

The previous EAs were paid out of budgets from the ministers' offices and were clearly identified on the government website. Why did you employ a shell game to try and create the impression that you had reduced the budget for ministers' offices?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, it's our government's purpose in bringing forward our spending plan to be entirely transparent and open about it.

Indeed, one of the things that we did in reducing the number of what were formerly called EAs is to create a position that's called Cabinet liaison so that those people serve across portfolios. They serve multiple ministers and they serve large parts of this province to try to make the connection between the people and the work of the government and the Cabinet and of this Legislature as effective and transparent as possible.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Last year you made a big show of saying that you were cutting political staff. Of course, that was before the election. Why did you quietly create these Cabinet liaison positions inside the line departments after the election?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Mr. McIsaac: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

It was well discussed and well documented when we did the estimates for my department. The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira asked the questions. Quite right, too. Talk about whether there were any contract positions. We explained that these four positions came into our department. The money came with them for the contracts. It was clear and wide open there, and as we

discussed at the time, it's a very good fit for our department. We're working on rural economic development. That's basically what agriculture and fisheries is. It made a great fit with our department so we're seeing that that was the place to place them and the dollars came with them.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Cabinet liaisons on government website

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, minister, but I'll go back to the Premier. The Premier said that one of the duties of these Cabinet liaisons was to help Cabinet ministers deal with questions from the public.

To the Premier: How can the public direct questions to these Cabinet liaisons if they aren't even identified on your own government's website?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, I'll go back and look at the question of whether there is anything more we can do with the website and if it's the case that we can do more, I appreciate the Leader of the Opposition drawing that to our attention.

But our whole purpose in government is to give good government, to let people know what we're doing, and to give all the visibility we can to these people because they are very helpful and they're excellent people and we're proud of them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Political staff department location

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In last year's budget these political staff were paid out of economical development department and this year out of agriculture

and fisheries. Is it your plan to move these political staff to different departments every year to obscure where they're being paid from?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, given the forensic talents across the way I don't think there's any point in us trying.

It didn't stay a secret very long. They were moved from Economic Development and Tourism to the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, along with the people who work –

Mr. Myers: Not sure if making fun of us is an appropriate –

Premier MacLauchlan: – along with the people who work in rural economic development.

Mr. Myers: – thing to say, but thanks for that.

Premier MacLauchlan: And, in fact, Mr. Speaker, it was for precisely the reasons that have been given on numerous occasions by the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, which I totally endorse.

Mr. Myers: You need to take it seriously (Indistinct) answer.

Premier MacLauchlan: That is the best place for them to do their work and to serve the people.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Myers: It's not a joke. You know that.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

At the time you said you'd be leading by example. That's what you said.

What kind of example were you trying to set by skirting transparency around your Cabinet's political staff?

Mr. Myers: Make another joke. No one laughed.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, as I say, we apparently did achieve transparency.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Political staff and seasonal employment

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

On Friday I was copied into an email correspondence concerning seasonal employment practices by this government.

In this email thread the former MLA stated he would reach out to government political staff to secure seasonal employment for someone the civil service rejected because they failed to meet the criteria.

Premier, why would your former MLA think your political staff is running the seasonal employment arm of your government?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning.

Mr. R. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

EDA work, non-profit organizations contact the department for a request to place people within their projects. The projects are all lined up and we have two people working on the EDA projects.

Everybody submits names to the organization. We base our allocation by need to the different groups and by need of the person that requires the job.

Most people, when they're out of a job for a long time, lose some respect in themselves. I think a job is a great path back to regaining their respect.

We work with both the nonprofit organizations and with the individuals in order to get them gainful employment.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Former MLA and current MLAs re: seasonal employment

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The reason I ran in my district and the reason, I believe, I got elected is because I do care about my residents. I'm getting calls every day from them about jobs and the desperation that they have regarding a job. In this same email the former MLA wrote that: Because I was an opposition MLA I would have no bearing on placements. It appears this government – your government, Premier – is working behind the scenes with the former MLA.

Premier, why are you working through defeated MLAs from your party rather than myself, the elected member for the district?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning.

Mr. R. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I can assure the member that we work with all MLAs.

Again, people in need that have no job have a rough time sometimes. We take names from MLAs and see if we can match them with jobs. I believe that an MLA has a reference point there. We will work with the current MLAs, and all MLAs in this Legislature, in order to help people that are working for work find work, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Former MLA and rules

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank the minister for those comments and the answer to the question.

I do feel that I work hard. I answer my emails. I answer calls. I attend meetings. I do whatever I can for all the not-for-profits in my district, and for all the residents, to make a difference for the district.

Premier, you campaigned on being different, of promising to do things differently.

Islanders took you at your word and now we see that it's simply more of the same.

Premier, can you explain to Islanders how having a former Liberal MLA circumvent the rules is doing things differently?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning.

Mr. R. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

If the hon. member wants a comment that she's working for her district, I can tell her people in this Legislature that she is working for her district. I can verify that, Mr. Speaker.

She has concerns for her district, like every other MLA in this Legislature.

As we heard the other night, when we come to this House, our partisan hats are put aside in a lot of instances. I think our partisan hats are put aside when we go and try to help individuals in our district. I know many MLAs – political stripes mean nothing to them when they're working for their constituents. I can attest this is one member that does it too.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, minister, for the comments again.

I hope that we all work together, that we do put our partisanship aside, but the concern is out there. I heard it yesterday. The phone never stopped ringing. There are no jobs. People are desperate. They're looking for work. They fill out the applications. They follow the rules and they're still not getting the positions.

But back to the Premier: Premier, explain to me how it's appropriate for your political staff to be contacted to twist the rules for a defeated MLA?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning.

Mr. R. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We are changing the processes that have been happening in the past. We are working together, all MLAs in this Legislature, for the betterment of all our constituents.

I can guarantee the members on my side of the floor and on the opposition side of the floor and the third party, we are here to help our constituents. Whatever we can do to help the constituents of Prince Edward Island, all Islanders, we are there for them.

As I said, a long time without a job you lose a lot of respect in yourself. As I say, the best way to regain your respect is through a job. We will work with anyone in order to achieve full employment on Prince Edward Island.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Optics on former MLA and rules

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There are dozens of constituents out there who feel that they don't have the confidence that they need for a job. They contact myself. They contact everyone here within the rail, I'm sure they do. They can't access a job through the proper channels by following the rules.

Back to the Premier. Question to the Premier: Would you agree that the optics of how this former MLA and your government are working together is troubling for not only you but for all your government?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning.

Mr. R. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm in charge of workforce, I'm in charge of the EDA program. I take a lot of calls from a lot of people all through the week and on the weekends, and I know every other member in this Legislature does. When people are desperate for employment they reach out to whoever they can reach out in order to find employment.

MLAs who represent their areas, they are usually the first point of contact when

they're in desperate straits. I think MLAs, working on behalf of their constituents in order to assist them in finding some employment – not getting them it, but assisting them in it and referring their names – is like anything else on a resumé. If my name is down as a reference that's okay.

I think we are willing to work with everybody. Non-profit groups. I get lots of calls from non-profit groups knowing this person or that person is in dire straits: Is there anything we can do? They're at the end of their rope.

The EDA program was set up to help people get back into the workforce. We are making changes to it. That's why the Premier, I think, has put it under the EDA and SkillsPEI together. Systems are going to change. We're going to work with the individuals more than we have in the past –

Mr. LaVie: Answer.

Mr. R. Brown: – in order to get them their education and back into a permanent workforce.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Overriding of seasonal employment rules

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It appears that the former MLA is out there campaigning with the help of the Premier's political staff. That's the optics of this situation.

There are dozens of Islanders who require jobs, who call each one of us, as I stated earlier, and follow the rules. Fill out the applications, do whatever they can, make the calls that need to be made, show up on the doorstep. They need a job. They're following the rules.

In this case we're circumventing the rules. The political staffers are circumventing the rules or trying to circumvent the rules. Now we see this Premier and this government using political override of a civil servant who is trying to ensure the rules are

followed. The civil servant did follow the rules.

Premier, why are you allowing this to take place under your leadership?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning.

Mr. R. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As soon as we were notified of the situation the staff was instructed: the rules are the rules and the rules are to be followed.

I understand that this person was not hired outside of the rules, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Basin Head signage

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Is the minister of tourism aware that Basin Head has been ranked top beach in Canada on more than one occasion and is a tourism anchor for eastern PEI?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yes, I am, first and foremost to the question. There are many good locations in the eastern part of the Island. You consider Basin Head and Red Point, and you have Elmira railway station, you have Campbell's Cove. You have all kinds of really nice establishments that could likely rank very high in any strategic evaluation of tourism products that we have here in PEI.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Eighty thousand people a year take in Basin Head and this government does not have a single sign to promote it. No promotion, 80,000 people.

Minister, how many more people do you think would be at Basin Head if we had the proper signage?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My department plays a vital role in supporting and developing tourism attractions, roofed accommodations, campgrounds, right across PEI. It's actually great to hear that 80,000 have found Basin Head.

But one thing that comes to mind continuously is that our pristine landscape on Prince Edward Island continues to rank very high with visitor satisfaction and one of the main reasons why they come to Prince Edward Island.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

For three years now I've been asking the government, pushing the government, to improve their promotion in eastern PEI. Three years I fought with the old minister of tourism and no signage.

Will the minister of tourism commit to adding more signage in eastern PEI on Route 2?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'll take the hon. member's concerns and look into the situation as far as Basin Head.

The signage issue has come up in the past and we have to be very aware of how important the tourism industry is to Prince Edward Island. We want to continue to advance the tourism industry, but we also want to maintain what we already have that is really good.

I will look into it. *Saltscapes Magazine* not too long ago, if I could paraphrase, I think it

was something to do with: There's no signage litter on Prince Edward Island. That's a pretty good thing to have when you're trying to promote the Island.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There's a \$40,000 sign on Route 2 that promotes Charlottetown west on one side and completely blank on the other side.

Some Hon. Members: Shame, shame!

Mr. LaVie: Mr. Speaker, the tourism minister is right, we do have Basin Head, we do have Red Point, we do have East Point Lighthouse, we do have Elmira train station, and the Magdalen Islands ferry, which attracts 80,000 vehicles a year, our community, the new community beach project, so he is right, we do have lots.

There are people just looking for better signage for eastern PEI. That's all we ask, is for better signage in eastern PEI. Basin Head has three divisions. It has transportation, it has tourism, and the minister of education is in there, too, so there are three ministers! Surely to God you can get a sign out of your three departments!

Minister: Will you get the signage in place before the start of this summer season?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We'll look into the situation –

Mr. LaVie: I've heard that for four years now. Look into it. (Indistinct) sign.

Mr. MacDonald: – and try to resolve the issue –

Mr. LaVie: Four years.

Mr. MacDonald: – if there's a lack of signage in the eastern end of the Island.

There's a lot of good businesses out there in the eastern end of the Island, and to have one overshadow the remainders, you know, the mayor of Souris may have some issues with that or the population of Elmira station –

Mr. LaVie: It's your sign. It's your Basin Head. Your sign, \$40,000 sign!

Mr. MacDonald: – Elmira railway station or Campbell's Cove campground –

Speaker: Hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: – may have issues with that, Mr. Speaker.

So I think a review, yes, I'll commit to a review, but I'd like to have –

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct) sign. (Indistinct) for a sign!

Mr. MacDonald: – more information from the community as a whole.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from West Royalty-Springvale.

Policing service review

Mr. Dumville: Mr. Speaker, the Premier indicated that for the first time since 1974 Prince Edward Island's policing service will undergo a review.

My question is to the Premier: Has this review begun and what would it entail?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker.

I'll be saying more about this in a statement, but yes, the review has begun. There was a competitive process to select consultants to lead and conduct the review. They've been selected and, in fact, they're currently in the province.

Four of them made a presentation and were present at the meeting yesterday in St. Peters of the Federation of Prince Edward Island Municipalities. That group has already commenced consultations with stakeholders.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from West Royalty-Springvale, first supplementary.

Policing service review and public consultation

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's important that all Islanders are involved in the process. Will there be opportunities for public consultation, and how will this proceed?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, of course, what took place yesterday in St. Peters is an example of public consultation.

There will be other meetings with direct stakeholders. There'll be opportunities for the public to make comment.

In fact, there will be a survey conducted by the Population Research Laboratory at the University of Alberta. That group will be making calls, randomly, to selected Islanders who will have an opportunity to respond to questions in that survey. This is being conducted by a group that's been in this field for several decades, in fact, and done reviews across Canada with a great deal of expertise.

Participation in that survey is voluntary, but I'd certainly encourage all Islanders to take part in it. For those who would want to get further information there is a website. It's on the government website with the backslash police service review.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from West Royalty-Springvale, second supplementary.

Policing service review re: quality of service

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Municipal police forces and the RCMP, they complement each other, they bring crucial and specific services to Islanders across the province.

This review provides a unique opportunity to strengthen policing practices on the Island, but there's also a temptation to be a cost-effective model, which could put some services at risk.

Will the Premier confirm that this review will be putting a greater emphasis on the quality of the service provided as opposed to be just a cost-cutting measure?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm happy to confirm what the hon. member has asked, that this is, in fact, about the crime prevention policing strategies and the most effective policing service model that can be suitable with all of the players involved here in Prince Edward Island.

The number one objective in all of this is public safety. As the hon. member indicated in the first part of his question, this is the first time that we've had a comprehensive policing review on Prince Edward Island since 1974 and I believe all of us look forward to the results.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Lewis Point.

PEITF concern over advisory councils

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question today is directed to the Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Minister, after the new educational advisory councils were announced Prince Edward Island Teachers' Federation was critical about their organization lack of participation. How have you as minister addressed these concerns?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Certainly am very aware of the concerns from the PEITF. We presented Islanders with a new direction in public education, a pillar to prosperity, at the end of November, with three distinct councils; the learning partners advisory council, the district advisory councils, and the principals' councils.

I'm extremely confident that the voice of the teacher is well represented, but it's one voice in that conversation about public education in the Province of Prince Edward Island.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Lewis Point, first supplementary.

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, you did agree that the voice of educators is very important in any part of our school system.

How can you guarantee that the voice of teachers will be heard in the design of the new councils?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Learning Partners Advisory Council, which is made up of 20 individuals, the PEITF president is sitting at that table. We have current teachers and a retired teacher, plus we have other educators particularly who teach at the University of Prince Edward Island. The principals' council has 62 school principals and the majority of them are teachers and they are a voice for Island teachers across the Province of Prince Edward Island. The District Advisory Council is a voice for parents and students which has actually 12 teachers who are parents.

So the voice of teachers and the balance of the conversation is very important, and the voice of teachers is very present and very strong in all three councils.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Basin Head signage (further)

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

To the minister of tourism: When will you have these signs in place?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I mentioned earlier, we'll review the issue the hon. member has brought to our attention and get back to him with possibly a deadline or even additional information after we consult with the community and the Mayor of Souris.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, yesterday at the Federation of Municipalities AGM there was quite a good question period going on there, to the credit of the government. There were eight Cabinet ministers present. Though the answers were somewhat vague in many cases, so I wanted to continue that question period today.

Number of municipalities

Question to the Minister of Communities, Land and Environment. Minister, although your mandate from the Premier is to implement the Thompson report, you have yet to officially state the exact goals of your government with respect to the number of municipalities on our Island.

Can you clearly state for the record what your goal is for the number of municipalities on PEI?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Communities, Land and Environment.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Pleased to reaffirm the goal of our department is to work with communities on a daily basis, to have discussions with them,

to give our support to them as they look at ways of growing their communities to making them very sustainable into the future.

We have had many meetings over the last year with many municipal leaders –

Mr. LaVie: How many? How many? Answer the question.

Mr. Mitchell: – all across Prince Edward Island. We continue to work with them to evaluate their situations today, where it looks like they will have to try to move –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct).

Mr. Mitchell: – to in the future and continue to –

Mr. LaVie: Answer the question.

Mr. Mitchell: – work with them as we move forward, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Minister, I know this is a politically sensitive issue, but your job as minister is to lead. If your intent is to end up with fewer municipalities why not just be clear, open and transparent and upfront with Islanders about it?

Is it your intention to have more or fewer municipalities at the end of this exercise?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Communities, Land and Environment.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is our intent to work with communities, work in a bottom-up approach –

Mr. LaVie: Rehearsed.

Mr. Mitchell: We have –

Mr. LaVie: Take that piece of paper away.

Mr. Mitchell: – discussed with many municipal leaders –

Mr. LaVie: Hide that piece of paper.

Mr. Mitchell: – that we will join with them as they go out in their communities for discussions. Currently there are several different communities that are talking to their neighbouring communities and looking at growing and looking at coming together as a larger region.

We support that. They have told us that they know this is what they have to do to maintain jobs and their economies in their communities and we support that.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, this is how rumours get started.

This is why the people of PEI can't figure out what's going on. We need a yes or no answer here.

Minister: Is it your intention to have fewer municipalities on Prince Edward Island?

Mr. LaVie: Yes or no?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Communities, Land and Environment.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Currently, as was stated in the Thompson report, we have 73 municipalities on Prince Edward Island. Judge Thompson had a recommendation in there that we should get down somewhere in the low 20s. We feel that municipalities are struggling in some areas. The federation of municipalities agrees with that. They are currently working on a toolbox –

Mr. LaVie: They're doing (Indistinct)? (Indistinct) your work for you.

Mr. Mitchell: – to assist municipalities and to go out and discuss with the communities around them the value and virtue of getting larger and growing with them.

We will continue to support that and be sitting at tables with the federation and the municipal leaders as they continue to move forward, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, we know that right now there are just over 70 municipalities on Prince Edward Island, and the simple question is: What is the target number of municipalities you want to see on Prince Edward Island, minister?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Communities, Land and Environment.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our vision for Prince Edward Island is a strong vision, one with very strong local governments –

Mr. LaVie: No plan, no plan.

Mr. Mitchell: – one that is working with their communities to –

Mr. Trivers: What are you working toward?

Mr. Mitchell: – keep the youth in those neighbourhoods, to build strong economic –

Mr. LaVie: Municipalities will make a plan for you.

Mr. Trivers: How many?

Mr. Mitchell: – regions within their boundaries so that there are jobs, so that there is a long vision 30, 40, 50 years out, and so that they have a very strong local voice where decisions are made right in their own neighbourhood. Not on the fourth floor of the Jones Building at the minister's desk.

So we will certainly support and enhance and work with those communities to do that, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Minister, you used a lot of terms there, really, things like grassroots and bottom-up to refer to how municipalities are supposed to lead the difficult amalgamation and annexation process.

Minister: Isn't this just an excuse to get Island community leaders to do the political dirty work for you?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Communities, Land and Environment.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I would like to refer to seven communities that are currently working together in a very positive and productive way to look at a larger region with stronger local government, a stronger local voice, with a very firm vision on creating a sustainable place for their children and their children's children to live.

I can guarantee you when this comes together it will be the model for communities of Prince Edward Island. We will work and support them and encourage them to come together in this larger region because it's the right thing to do. Seven community leaders know it's the right thing to do, and that's why they're sitting at a table and discussing it, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Support for municipalities

Mr. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, Islanders desperately need this government's leadership on this issue, and to top it off, smaller municipalities feel like they don't have enough resources and support to take on the types of activities needed to restructure.

We heard that at the resolution at the Federation of Municipalities' AGM yesterday.

Minister, if you want municipalities to carry the load, then shouldn't they be properly supported to do that?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Communities, Land and Environment.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker,

The Federation of Municipalities' meeting yesterday was a positive and productive meeting from 8:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. with

a lot of coverage of a very interested group of people on a lot of items.

There was a discussion there about regionalization, amalgamation, and annexation (Indistinct), and some who, like the member across, think that forced amalgamation is the way to go. Certainly there was –

Mr. LaVie: He never said that.

Mr. Mitchell: There was –

Mr. LaVie: He never said it.

Mr. Mitchell: – some that came to the mic –

Mr. LaVie: You just said that.

Mr. Mitchell: – that said forced amalgamation is –

Mr. LaVie: He never said that.

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct) targets.

Mr. Mitchell: – not something that'll work. If you force people to do things it'll be met with resistance and apprehension. I agree as minister, that the way to go is a bottom-up approach, talk to neighbouring communities, communities with common interests, with common goals, and this'll be a very productive and positive way for regions to get larger, stronger, better, and more efficient, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, I think the Minister of Communities, Land and Environment maybe could look over to the Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture and learn about the community advisory councils that they're putting together and do something similar for annexation and amalgamation.

Minister, not once in all the times that you've discussed amalgamation, and especially annexation, have I heard you talk about engaging communities and residents on unincorporated land. These are places that are not incorporated, not municipalities.

In fact, I had to issue a FOIPP request to get a public presentation on this topic to share with all Islanders.

Public consultation on structure of communities

Minister, will you commit today in this House to engaging all Islanders so they can have a say in how their communities will be structured?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Communities, Land and Environment.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I stated, all across Prince Edward Island we have many different groups of communities that are at various levels of discussion regarding the future of how their boundaries will look.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities is assisting with this, as are we at the department level, and as I am at the minister level.

The member was at the meeting yesterday when I stood and I referenced to the whole group in the room that when they get to the point of going out and talking to the neighbouring communities I will be with them at the table. That has been well received.

The groups are continuing to do their work and I certainly applaud and support them.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Communities, Land and Environment is asking our community leaders, that are mostly volunteers – very little payment for what they do and a lot of headaches - to step up and do this hard work, and they don't even have a goal as to what they're trying to achieve.

100% incorporation

I want to ask the minister one more time: Is it your goal to have 100% of PEI incorporated?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Communities, Land and Environment.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Obviously from the member's line of questioning he feels that forced amalgamation on Prince Edward Island is the way to go.

Mr. LaVie: He never said that.

Mr. Mitchell: On this side of the House we don't see it that way, and I don't as minister.

Mr. LaVie: He never said "forced."

Mr. Mitchell: It is about discussing and talking and having conversations –

Mr. Trivers: We just want to know where we're headed.

Mr. Mitchell: – with municipal leaders all across Prince Edward Island –

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct).

Mr. Mitchell: – and developing new regions that will be more efficient and better into the future. We think that's the way to go and we'll continue on that path, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald, final question.

IRAC's role re: planning

Mr. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, another concern at the federation of municipalities was really the role that IRAC plays in approving municipal decisions.

This is a very important topic because IRAC plays this role in many areas, especially for the unincorporated parts of Prince Edward Island as well.

I know that my constituents down on Millvale Road with the power transmission lines are really struggling with the lack of transparency there.

Minister, Island municipalities want IRAC's role to be changed so that applications

reviewed under the *Planning Act* are sent back to municipalities, and then they can be worked on and brought back to IRAC. That's what they want.

Are you prepared to change the role of IRAC to address this issue, minister?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Communities, Land and Environment.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I was a member in the room when the resolution came to the floor. Currently that resolution is being put to paper.

I understand the role of IRAC does not fall under my role as minister of communities, but I assume when that gets to us we will be looking at that. But that will be, perhaps, a question for the minister responsible for IRAC, hon. member.

[End of Question Period]